

Reconsidering Immigration Is Mexico a Special Case?

By Samuel P. Huntington

Partial truths or half-truths are often more insidious than total falsehoods. Total falsehoods can be easily exposed for what they are by citing exceptions to their claims. Hence, they are less likely to be accepted as the total truth. A partial truth, on the other hand, is plausible, because there is evidence to support it. And hence, it is easy to assume that it is the total truth.

There are at least two partial truths concerning American identity that often are accepted as the whole truth. These include, first, that America is a proposition country — a country whose identity is defined by commitment to a particular set of values and ideals, formulated and expressed in the writings of the founding fathers, most notably in the Declaration and the Constitution. These are what Gunnar Myrdal described as the American Creed. This creedal concept of American identity is now often assumed to be the total truth concerning American identity.

It is, however, only part of American identity. For much of our history we defined ourselves in racial, religious, ethnic, and cultural terms, as well as in propositional or creedal terms. We really only came around to accepting and integrating the propositional dimension of identity into a concept of ourselves at the time of the American Revolution. Before that we had thought of ourselves in large part as being defined religiously: 98 percent of Americans were Protestant. The enemies were the Catholics — the French and the Spanish. This, of course, was also the attitude of the British, who defined themselves in similar terms.

We also thought of ourselves in racial and largely ethnic terms. Eighty percent of Americans in the decades of the Revolution were from the British Isles, with 60 percent English and 20 percent Scotch and Scotch-Irish, while the other 20 percent was largely German and Dutch. In the 19th century, the massive

immigration of Irish and German Catholics, and at the end of that century large-scale immigration from Eastern Europe, contributed tremendously to religious and ethnic diversification and eventually eliminated these ethnic components of American identity. The racial element, however, still remained. From 1882 until the 1950s, a whole series of legislation excluded immigrants from Asia from coming to our society. Also, of course, for most of this time most Americans thought of America as a white country with, at best, only a very segregated and subordinate role for blacks. In addition, from the earliest time American identity has been defined in terms of the Anglo-Protestant culture, values, and institutions of the founding settlers, including individualism, liberty, the work ethic, the rule of law, private property, and hostility to concentrated power.

The founding fathers added the propositional dimension to American identity at the time of the Revolution. How else were they going to justify themselves in rebelling against the British monarchy? The British were white, English, and Protestant, just as we were. They had to have some other basis on which to justify

Samuel P. Huntington is the Albert J. Weatherhead III University Professor at Harvard University, where he is also the Chairman of the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies. Professor Huntington founded the quarterly journal Foreign Policy and served as its co-editor until 1977. In 1977 and 1978 he served at the White House as Coordinator of Security Planning for the National Security Council. His most recent book, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, has been translated into 26 languages.

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independence, and happily they were able to formulate the inalienable truths set forth in the Declaration. Those, of course, have remained a key component, but only one component of American identity.

'A Nation of Immigrants':

Only a Partial Truth

The other aspect of American identity worth focusing on is the concept of America as a nation of immigrants. That certainly is a partial truth. But it is often assumed to be the total truth. We have all heard people say, again and again, that all Americans, except possibly the Indians, are immigrants or the descendants of immigrants. My colleague at Harvard, Oscar Handlin, began his classic book, *The Uprooted*, by saying, "the immigrants *were* American history." That's overstating it. Yes, immigrants and immigration have been an important part of the American history. But they are not all American history. There are at least three critical points that need to be made in this connection.

The idea of America as an immigrant society is a half truth.

The first is a basic distinction between immigrants and settlers. Immigrants are people who leave one country, one society, and move to another society. But there has to be a recipient society to which the immigrants move. In our case, the recipient society was created by the settlers who came here in the 17th and 18th centuries. They came in groups to create new societies up and down the Atlantic seaboard. They weren't immigrating to some existing society; indeed, they often did whatever they could do to destroy whatever existed here in the way of Indian society. They were establishing new societies, in some cases for commercial reasons, in more cases for religious reasons. They had an image of what they wanted to create and they came and formed a settlement to try to realize their image. They also had to come together and agree as to how they were going to define their community. The archetypal case of this was the Mayflower Compact.

A fundamental difference thus exists between settlers and immigrants. With immigrants the process of moving is to a much greater extent a personal process involving individuals and families, whereas with settlers there is a much more collective process of a group of

people moving and saying, "we're unhappy where we are for one reason or another, and we want to move elsewhere and form our own society." The society that the settlers created on the Eastern seaboard was shaped in terms of their values and cultures, among which there were significant differences, as David Hackett Fisher emphasized in his superb book, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. But there are also tremendous similarities, and they basically created a society defined by what I think can be described succinctly as an Anglo-Protestant culture.

It was this society and culture that among other things — including economic opportunities here and repression in Europe — attracted subsequent generations of immigrants to this country. Some 55 million people left Europe in the century or so from the beginning of the 19th century until the 1920s, with 34 million of them coming to America. They came in considerable measure because they were attracted by what they saw here and by what the settlers created.

A Nation of Emigrants, Too

The term "immigrant" as distinguished from "emigrant" only came into the English language in the 1790s, and was created by people already here to describe the new people who were arriving. They drew a very sharp distinction between these new arrivals, these immigrants, and those who had been here for decades or conceivably a century and a half or so, who were the original settlers and founders of society.

Campbell Gibson has done a very interesting demographic analysis of the evolution of the United States in which he makes the argument, backed by considerable statistics and complicated formulae, that if no immigrants had come to this country after 1790, the population of the United States in 1990 would have been about 49 percent of what it actually was. Thus, biologically speaking the American people are literally only half an immigrant people.

Let me mention two other aspects of this. First of all, we haven't always welcomed immigrants. The National Immigration Forum, a very pro-immigration outfit, said in one of its publications, "In addition to being a nation of immigrants the United States has also been a nation of nativists." That's true. There have been great efforts at various times in our history to limit immigration. One can argue about what constitutes a high level or a low level of immigration. If, however, one looks at the figures, in only one decade — the 1850s — did the annual intake of immigrants amount to more than

1 percent of the population each year. In three other decades it was over eight-tenths of 1 percent, while in six decades it was less than four-tenths of 1 percent. Obviously immigration has been tremendously important to this country. But the foreign-born population has exceeded 10 percent of the total population only in the seven census years from 1860 to 1930, to which the year 2000 will almost certainly be added.

Finally, in my critique of the immigration image of America, it is also important to know that we're not only a nation of immigrants, but we are in some part a nation of emigrants, which often gets neglected. There are some rather obscure scholarly analyses of emigration from the United States, but we generally don't focus on this. The early immigrants in the 19th Century did not emigrate back to their home countries in great numbers. But in the great wave of immigration from the 1880s down through World War I, almost a third of the immigrants emigrated. In the 20th Century, it has been calculated that 31 percent of immigrants to the United States then left the United States. And if one looks at the figures that Michael Piore analyzed in his book on this question, in the years 1908 to 1910, emigration amounted to about 32 percent of immigration, with rather interesting variations among different ethnic groups. Emigration was 65 percent for Hungarians, 63 percent for Northern Italians, 59 percent for Slovaks, 56 percent for Southern Italians, but went down to only 10 percent for Scots, 8 percent for Jews and Welsh, and 7 percent for Irish.

Since the new wave of immigration as a result of the 1965 changes, overall emigration appears to be somewhat lower than earlier in this century. I've seen a figure suggesting about 22 percent. That's an interesting shift downward. But again, emigration is still part of the American experience.

The other major theme I would like to put before you concerns the whole question of immigration in relationship to American national identity, and particularly what has happened since 1965 and its consequences for American national identity.

When I began to investigate this, my first thought was that we probably have a real problem with immigration. But then I came to the conclusion that no, while there may be an immigration problem, it isn't really a serious problem. The really serious problem is assimilation. "Assimilation to what?", we have been asked today. John Fonte suggested patriotic assimilation, but unlike the situation 75 or 100 years ago, now that's a big issue. What do people assimilate to? Back then that was pretty clear, and there were great pressures, and a certain amount

of coercion, to ensure that immigrants did assimilate to the Anglo-Protestant culture, work ethic, and the principles of the American Creed. Now we're not sure what immigrants should assimilate to. And that's a serious problem.

Immigration from Mexico

As I went further in my still very preliminary research in this area, I couldn't help but feel that there was a still more significant problem, a problem that encompasses immigration, assimilation, and other things, too. And that is what I will simply refer to as the Mexican problem. Much of what we now consider to be problems concerning immigration and assimilation really concern Mexican immigration and assimilation. Mexican immigration poses challenges to our policies and to our identity in a way nothing else has in the past.

Mexican immigration poses issues that are quite unique in American history.

There are five distinctive characteristics of the Mexican question, which make it very special.

First of all, Mexican immigration is different because of contiguity. We have usually thought of immigration as being symbolized by the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, and perhaps now by Kennedy Airport. But Mexican immigration is very different. Mexicans don't come across two thousand miles of ocean. They come across, often easily, two thousand miles of border. The whole framework we have of thinking about immigration, in terms of people coming from overseas into our land, is not very relevant to thinking about the problem of our immigration from Mexico.

Our relationship with Mexico in this regard is unique for us, and in many respects unique in the world. No other first-world country has a land frontier with a third world country—much less one of 2,000 miles. The significance of this border is enhanced by the economic differences between the two countries. As David Kennedy has pointed out, the income gap between the United States and Mexico is the largest between any two contiguous countries in the world.

Secondly, there's simply the question of numbers. Mexican immigration during the past several decades has been substantial for very understandable reasons. It is easy for Mexicans to come to this country. The cost is relatively low and the risks minimal. They are

also easily able to return to Mexico and to maintain contact with their family and friends there. In 1998 Mexican immigrants numbered over seven million and constituted 27 percent of the total foreign-born population in this country. The next largest two contingents, Filipinos and Chinese, amounted to only 4.4 percent and 4.3 percent of the foreign born. In addition, Mexicans constituted about two-thirds or so of the Hispanic immigrants and Spanish speakers in turn were over one-half the total immigrants to the United States between 1970 and 1996. The post-1965 wave of immigration differs from the previous waves in having a majority from a single non-English linguistic group.

No other first-world country has a land frontier with a third-world country at all — much less one of 2,000 miles.

The third distinguishing characteristic of the Mexican issue is, of course, illegality. Illegal immigration is overwhelmingly a post-1965 and a Mexican phenomenon. A huge proportion of illegal immigrants have been Mexicans. In 1995, according to one report, Mexicans made up 62 percent of the immigrants who entered the United States illegally, and just under 40 percent of all illegal immigrants, including the visa overstayers who are in America illegally. In 1997, the INS estimated that 54 percent of the total illegal immigrant population in the United States were Mexican, and Mexican illegals were nine times as numerous as the next largest contingent, from El Salvador. Hence, the question of illegal entry is very largely Mexican issue.

The next important characteristic of Mexican immigration has been its concentration in a particular region. Mexican immigrants are heavily concentrated in the Southwest and particularly in Southern California. This has very real consequences. Others pointed out today that our founding fathers had somewhat ambivalent views about immigration, but they were generally favorable. The one thing they emphasized again and again, however, was that immigrants would have to be dispersed among what they described as the English population in this country. Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, and others all made this point. And to the extent that we have a large regional concentration of immigrants, I think that is a departure from the usual pattern.

Now obviously in the past, we have had high concentrations of immigrants in particular areas, such as

the Irish in Boston, but by and large the immigrants have dispersed to different cities historically, and those cities have generally been host simultaneously to many different immigrant groups. This is the case still in New York, where you read again and again and again how New York schoolteachers have to teach classes with children coming from fifteen to twenty different linguistic groups. This is clearly not the case, by and large, in the Southwest and particularly in Southern California, where two-thirds or more of the children in schools are likely to be Spanish speaking. As my former colleague, Abe Lowenthal, and Katrina Burgess, in their book, *The California-Mexico Connection*, said, “No school system in a major U.S. city has ever experienced such a large influx of students from a single foreign country. The schools of Los Angeles are becoming Mexican.”

Finally, and perhaps next to contiguity the most important factor is a general one but one with a special relevance to the Mexican case. This is simply the persistence of large immigration. The wave of immigration in the 1840s and 1850s, from Ireland and Germany, came to an end with the Civil War and with the easing of the potato famine in Ireland. The big wave at the turn of the century came to an end with World War I and the restrictive legislation in 1924. This greatly helped to facilitate the assimilation of those immigrants. In contrast, there does not seem to be any prospect of the current wave coming to an end soon unless we get into a big war or a really big depression. Mexican immigration may eventually begin to subside as result of shifts in the Mexican birth rate, which is going down, and possibly as a result of long-term economic development in Mexico. But those effects will only work in a very long term. And so for the time being we are faced with a very substantial continued immigration from Mexico.

The Self-Enhancing Process of Immigration

It is important here also to point out that sustained high levels of immigration build on themselves. Immigration reinforces immigration. Once one group has come, it's easier for the next group, and then for subsequent groups. Immigration is not a self-limiting process, it's a self-enhancing process. Also, particularly in this country, the longer immigration continues the more difficult politically it is to stop it. Immigrants themselves, at least from my brief exposure to polls on this issue, are not necessarily overwhelmingly in favor of more immigrants coming in — there is a certain “let's shut the door after us”

psychology at work — but by and large, they tend to favor it. Certainly the leaders of immigrant organizations and interest groups do. They have a vested interest in expanding their own constituency. And hence, as immigration continues to enjoy political support, organizational support for it also mounts and it becomes more and more difficult to limit or to reshape it.

For these reasons Mexican immigration poses issues that are quite unique in American history, and make Mexican immigration different from the other immigration that is occurring at the present time. I have not tried to analyze the implications of this for assimilation in any depth. As I look at it, in terms of various indices of assimilation, the answer appears to be uncertain. In terms of education and economic activity, however, Mexicans rate much lower than other immigrant groups.

With respect to intermarriage, Hispanics marry outside their group more than blacks but less than Asians and members of European ethnic groups. More significantly, unlike that of other groups historically, the rate of Hispanic intermarriage appears to be decreasing rather than increasing: in 1977, 31 percent of all Hispanic marriages were interethnic, in 1994, 25.5 percent were. This trend, if it continues, will be one major consequence of the unprecedented high level of immigration to this country by Mexicans and other Hispanics. With respect to language skill, I think undoubtedly Mexicans in a large part will follow the same pattern of earlier immigrants, with the third generation being fluent in English and quite possibly, unlike previous third generations, also fluent in their ancestral language. All of the characteristics which I have mentioned lead to the possibility of a cultural community evolving in the Southwest, in which people could be able to pursue satisfactory careers within an overwhelmingly Spanish-speaking and Mexican community, without ever having to speak English. This has already happened with the Cubans in Miami, and it could be reproduced on a larger and more significant scale in the southwestern United States. As we know, people of His-

panic origin at some point in the coming decades will be a majority of the people in California and eventually in other southwestern states. America is moving in the direction of becoming a bilingual and bicultural society.

Mexico thus represents a very distinct problem as far as the United States is concerned. Without Mexican immigration, the overall level of immigration to this country would be perhaps two-thirds of what it has been, near the levels that Barbara Jordan's commission recommended. Illegal entries would be relatively minor. The average level of the skill and education of immigrants would be undoubtedly the highest in American history. The much debated balance of the relative economic benefits and costs of immigration would tilt heavily toward the former, and the wage levels of less skilled Americans would rise. The bilingual education issue would disappear from our agenda. A major potential challenge to the cultural and conceivably the political integrity of the United States would also fade away.

Mexico and Mexican immigration, however, will not disappear, and Americans must learn to live with both. That may become more and more difficult. In one of his first statements Mexican President-Elect Vicente Fox said that his goal was eventually to eliminate all restrictions on the movement of people between his country and the United States. In almost every recent year, the Border Patrol has stopped over one million people attempting to come into the United States illegally from Mexico. It is generally estimated that each year about 300,000 do make it across illegally. If over one million Mexican soldiers crossed the border Americans would treat it as a major threat to their national security and react accordingly. The invasion of over one million Mexican civilians, as Fox seems to recommend, would be a comparable threat to American societal security, and Americans should react against it with comparable vigor.

Mexican immigration is a unique, disturbing, and looming challenge to our cultural integrity, our national identity, and potentially to our future as a country.

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